

Yeah, Yeah! I Know What PR Is!

By Robert A. Kelly

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That's easy! People act on their perception of the facts, and something can be done about those perceptions. So when public relations creates, changes or reinforces that opinion by reaching, persuading and moving-to-desired-action those people whose behaviors affect the organization, the public relations effort is a success. This leads directly to the bottom line – perceptions altered, behaviors modified, client/employer satisfied.

But not everybody believes that's the job public relations is meant to do. So, in hopes of getting closer to the truth, here are a few contrasting definitions of public relations, and a reaction to each.

“PR is all about image.” Well, this would ring truer if we knew that s/he focused that image directly on changing individual perception leading to predictable behavior modification. AND as planned at the beginning of the public relations program.

“PR creates mutual understanding?” Yes, but in the interest of OUR understanding, why not add “by leading to modifying the perception and thus the behavior of key audiences as planned before the effort got under way”?

“PR is doing good and getting credit for it.” But SO much more effective when that credit results in altered perceptions and modified behaviors of key audiences.

“PR is the management of communications between an organization and its publics.” And, again, SO much more effective when those communications are positioned to reach and alter individual perception and behaviors.

“PR is the science of cultivating a presence in the community.” But only as long as that presence impacts groups of people

important to the organization and results in altering their perceptions and modifying their behaviors, hopefully as planned at the outset.

“PR is talking to the media on behalf of a client.” An important means to an even more important end – carefully planned communications aimed at target audiences in order to alter their perception and modify their behaviors.

“PR is the art and science of helping clients or employers communicate more effectively and persuasively with audiences that impact them.” Good, as far as it goes. But, it would be better if it said “the science of helping clients or employers achieve the behavior modification they REALLY want,” rather than stopping at the interim communications step.

And finally, “PR is the ability to influence public opinion.” Which displays a trait common to most of these pronouncements – it stops short of a clear description of what people who are paying for public relations really want. (Hint: altered behaviors).

Deep down, employers and clients are not primarily interested in our ability to hang out with the media, or communicate or paint images. Nor are they especially fascinated with our efforts to identify target audiences, set public relations goals and strategies, write persuasive messages, select communications tactics, et al.

What they invariably DO want is a change in the behaviors of certain key audiences which leads directly to the achievement of their business objectives. So, the emphasis in this article is on careful planning for altered key audience perceptions and modified behaviors.

Which is why quality planning, and the degree of behavioral change it produces, defines success or failure of a public relations program.

Fact is, done right, when public relations modifies behaviors among groups of people important to an organization, we could be talking about nothing less than its survival.

end

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